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The inscribed Buddha Image donated by Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā kept in the Sakya Monastery

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Abstract:

The article interprets a dedicatory inscription preserved in the Sakya Monastery (Tibet), where the bronze and inscription were noticed by Luo Wenhua. The inscription mentions the names of four generations of the family of donors, the youngest being a baby. The edition and translation are accompanied by a commentary focussing on linguistic peculiarities and the probable cultural background of the donors.

Keywords:

Sakya Monastery, dedicatory inscriptions, family of donors, group-inflection, *gharā*, *dhātṛpī*, *ubhayakula*, *jayapuṇyavivṛddhi*.

Introduction by Luo Wenhua

The Sakya Monastery (Sa skya dgon) is the main monastery of the Sakya sect in Tibet. It is located on both banks of the Grum Chu River in the center of the Sakya County, Shigatse City, Tibet Autonomous Region. The monastery was built in 1073 to the south of the town Bön-po ri (dBon po ri) by Könchog gyelpo (dKon mchog rgyal po [1034–1102]), a descendant of the local noble Khön (’khon) family. Later, it developed into the Sakya North Monastery.

The Sakya South Monastery was built by Sakya dPon chen Shakya bzang po (1243–1270) on the southern bank of the Grum chu River in 1268 after he had been commissioned to do so by Phakpa (’Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1235–1280), who later became the “imperial preceptor” (1260) and “preceptor of the emperor” (1270) during the Yuan Dynasty. The monastery was at the same time transformed into the political center of the Sakya regime.¹

After the Sakya North Monastery was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), only the South Monastery survived relatively intact, and all the collections are now housed in the Sakya South Monastery.

The number of bronzes kept in the Sakya Monastery is very impressive. It is generally assumed that as many as 2,000 ancient bronzes are displayed in the wall in niches of the Phur pa lha khang. The treasures of this collection are relatively little known, because they are not

¹ 宿白『藏传佛教寺院考古』, 北京: 文物出版社 [Su Bai, *Archaeology of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries*, Beijing: Wen wu chu ban she] 1996, pp. 99–100.

included in Ulrich von Schroeder's brilliant work *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*.²

Due to the very restrictive administration of the Sakya monastery, research and, consequently, publications on the rich collection of bronzes in the Sakya Monastery are very limited. On the other hand, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage of China allocated funds for an extensive conservation project of the Sakya Monastery during the years 2002 through 2009. Moreover, from 2015 to 2017, the Tibet Cultural Relics Bureau sent experts to the monastery in order to comprehensively sort out the bronzes, thangkas, ritual implements, and prints of the Buddhist canon preserved in the Monastery.

In addition, in 2012, the Sakya Temple Management Committee established a treasure hall on the left side of the square in front of the Lha khang chen mo. Thus this is one of the very few monasteries in Tibet that is provided with a separate exhibition room. A number of ancient bronzes, several thangkas, ritual implements and some holy relics are on display in this hall. Although the method of display and the lighting may not always be up to present-day standards, the collections displayed are impressive. Among them are exquisite Buddhist statues from the ancient Himalayas and India, early Tibetan statues and the Lotus Mandala made by the Ming court, as well as the Sanskrit palm-leaf manuscripts. These manuscripts are adorned with exquisite illuminations in Pāla style. Furthermore, there are also thangkas from Nepal and Chinese embroidered thangkas dated to the 15th and 16th centuries. Although the space in the exhibition room is limited, the historical and artistic value of the collection is impressive.

In 2020, when I visited the Sakya Monastery for the fourth time, I also revisited the Treasure Hall. On this occasion, I found the ancient statue of Shakyamuni Buddha from Northwest India, which is published here, and noticed the Sanskrit inscription running around the square pedestal of this statue. The statue and the inscription, which provides interesting information, have never been published (figures 1 and 2).

Because it is not normally allowed to take photos in the exhibition room, I had to ask the deputy director of the Sakya Monastery Management Committee, Tuden Dorje (Thugs lden rdo rje / 萨迦寺寺庙管理委员会副主任), for permission to photograph the bronze together with its inscription. After waiting for two months, I finally received a complete set of images of the statue. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Sakya Temple Management Committee for its support, particularly to the deputy director Tuden Dorje for providing excellent images and granting permission to publish the bronze and inscription.

Reading of the inscription and commentary by O. v. Hinüber

Although the inscription is slightly damaged, the overall reading does not pose any serious problem because only a very few characters are difficult to read and interpret. The text runs continuously around the pedestal beginning as usual at the right side of the Buddha:

right side of the Buddha (figure 3):

saṃ 46 deya dharmo yaṃ vappaṭa gharā

front side (figure 4):

² U. von Schroeder: *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*, Vol. 2: Tibet and China. Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001.

dhruvabhaṭā putra mahāśrī bhīmaṭa bhāryā śrī maddhatpalaka pautra mahāśrī amara duhi

left side (figure 5):

(t)[r] dhātṛpī amaradevyā ubhayakula

back side (figure 6):

*sarvasatvānām puṇyābhivṛddhaye pratiṣṭhāpitam idam**

In the year 46 (AD 670/1). This is the pious gift of Vappaṭa, his wife from a good family Dhruvabhaṭā, (their) son Mahāśrī Bhīmaṭa, (his) wife Śrī Maddhatpalak(ā)(?), (their) grandson Mahāśrī Amara, (his) daughter the baby Amaradevī. This (image) is set up for the increase of merit³ of members of (their) families of both sides (i.e., husband and wife) (and) of all beings.

The reading of the obscure name *maddhatpalaka* is uncertain. The first character seems to be *ma* because the alternative reading of the character as the similar character *sa* is ruled out once *sarvasatva* is compared. If enlarged, it seems that there is a small loop on top of both of the vertical strokes. In the case that this observation is correct, the enlarged character looks slightly similar to the older form of the character *ha*. If this is so, both the older and the modern form of the character *ha* would appear side by side in the inscription (figure 8; on both forms of the character *ya* see below).⁴ This, however, remains highly doubtful.

Although the feminine is guaranteed by the preceding *bhāryā*, the expected long *-ā* at the end is missing. If this is correct, a second lacking *-ā-* might be suspected in *palaka* for *p(ā)lak(ā)*. On the other hand, if a superscript *-o-* should be missing, the name could end in *°-utpalak(ā)*, if **maddh(o)tpalak(ā)* is reconstructed.

If all possibilities, including writing mistakes, are considered, the name could be Maddhatpalak(ā), Maddhatpālak(ā), Maddhotpalak(ā), Madvatpalakā, etc. or perhaps much less likely Haddhatpalakā, etc.. However, as long as *maddhat-°* / *madvat-°* (or *haddhat-°* / *hadvat-°*) remains obscure, any emendation of the second member of the name except for the ending *°-ā* is risky and should be avoided. In the following, the form Maddhatpalak(ā) is kept on practical grounds without ruling out any of the other possibilities.⁵

Although the word *duhitṛ*, which is written around the corner of the front and the left side, is slightly damaged with only the subscript *-ṛ* of the character *ṛ* being visible, there can be no doubt about the reading.

While an interchange between *tri/ṛ* is fairly common, the replacement of *trī* by *tṛ* as in

³ The wording *puṇyābhivṛddhaye* is similar to the concluding part of the metrical dedicatory inscription engraved by Gotrapāla (figure 7):

a[gre]matyājñayā bhavyā / sarvajñapratimā śubhā
kāritā gotrapālena / jaya<pu>nyavivṛddhaye || O

“By order of the chief minister, this beautiful and pure image of the Omniscient has been made by Gotrapāla for the increase of victory and merit.”

A poorly written character added below the end of line 2 which looks like *ga* rather than *pu* seems to be a not very successful attempt to insert the missing character *pu*. The inscription is published in U. von Schroeder: *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*. Volume 1: India and Nepal. Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications 2001, p. 464 no. 143D-F, image p. 465, no. 143E (Potala Collection).

⁴ Both characters, old and new are used side by side in manuscripts DE of the *Samghātasūtra* (figure 8: Manuscript E), cf. *The Samghātasūtra. A Popular Devotional Sanskrit Text*, edited by O. v. Hinüber. ARIRIAB 24. 2021. Supplement. II.2.3 Remarks on the Manuscripts. 5. Manuscript E, p. XLII.

⁵ A segmentation *śrīmad dhatpalaka* or *hatpalaka* is ruled out before a feminine name. A reading *māddhat-°* is very unlikely.

dhātīpī is rare but does occasionally occur also in the Gilgit manuscripts.⁶

All names with the exception of Maddhatpalak(ā) are easily understood. Vappaṭa and Bhīmaṭa are formed by the typical north-western, particularly Kashmirian suffix *-aṭa*;⁷ Bappaṭa occurs as the name of various persons in the Rājatarāṅgiṇī and elsewhere.

Besides the personal names, the common words *gharā*, *putra*, *bhāryā*, *pautra* and *duhitṛ* *dhātīpī* occur in the string of names. Most interesting and perhaps even unique is the word *dhātīpī*, “drinking from a wet-nurse,” which does not seem to be attested to elsewhere so far. At the same time, this seems to be the first instance where a baby is explicitly included and participates in a donation.

A semantic problem is incurred concerning the exact meaning of *gharā*, which is not listed in our dictionaries. There are two possibilities. The word *gharā* preceding the name Dhruvabhaṭā qualifies the wife of Vappaṭa. Usually, as here in *bhāryā śrī maddhatpalak(ā)*, the wording *bhāryā dhruvabhaṭā* is to be expected, if his wife is named. From the overall structure of the inscription, it is evident that Dhruvabhaṭā is indeed the wife of Vappaṭa because the following persons named are clearly their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Therefore, it is perhaps not too farfetched a guess to take *gharā* tentatively as a synonym of *gharaṇī* “the wife of a rich man” and as an abbreviation (due to the lack of space?) of *bhāryā gharā*, cf. *sabhari[ya](k)asa ghara[n]i(ya) hadaya* (i. e. *bhāryā gharaṇī* Hadā) in the Kotappakonda inscription.⁸ If this is correct, Dhruvabhaṭā would be the wife of a wealthy or otherwise outstanding man, the “distinguished” (wife) of Vappaṭa, whose social position is thus indicated indirectly.⁹ However, there is an alternative to this explanation when the word Pāli *gharasuṇhā*, “daughter-in-law from a good family,” that occurs again in the Kotappakonda inscription is compared.¹⁰ Consequently it is also possible, perhaps even more likely, that *gharā* might be an abbreviation of **gharabhāryā* “wife from a good family.” A decision between both these conjectural explanations remains open at present due to the dearth of material.

Names and common nouns, except the very last *amaradevyā*, appear in their stem form. This structure, a long string of words in their stem form with only the very last one being provided with a case ending as here in the genitive *amaradevyā* points to a “group-inflection.” This phenomenon has been described by J. Brough for literary Buddhist texts and

⁶ *Samghāṭasūtra* II.2.3 Remarks on the Manuscripts. 1. Manuscript A, p. XXIX: There is a singular instance in manuscript A which is written in Gandhāran Brāhmī: *tīṇi /trīṇi* (Sgh § 28 note 151), while there are numerous examples in the proto-Śāradā manuscript D, p. XXXIX. The interpretation of the characters *ṛ/ṛ* in the Gandhāran Brāhmī of manuscript K is problematic (p. L).

⁷ A. Hilka: *Die altindischen Personennamen*. Indische Forschungen 3. Heft. Breslau 1910, p. 63 and J. Wackernagel: *Altindische Grammatik* II.2: A. Debrunner: Die Nominalsuffixe. Göttingen 1954, p. 158 § 63b.

⁸ O. v. Hinüber: “The Kotappakonda Donation of Siddhārtha.” ARIRIAB 20. 2017, pp. 3–9, particularly p. 5 and *Kanaganahalli Inscriptions*. ARIRIAB 17. 2014. Supplement, p. 16 foll.

⁹ E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil suggest quite a different meaning for *ghariṇī* in the index to their edition of the *Divyāvadāna* (1886): “widow(?),” “for reasons not evident to me” as F. Edgerton remarks in his BHSD s.v. *ghariṇī*. The word occurs only twice. At *Divyāvadāna* 46,27 it is said that 500 *ghariṇīs* live together in a certain place and again that they erect a Stupa called *ghariṇīstūpa*, Divy 47,25. The reason behind the guess that *ghariṇī* might mean “widow” seems to be the fact that 500 of them lived together, something that housewives with living husbands would not normally do nor would they hardly be allowed to do. Their way of life could indeed point to a community of widows living outside society. The meaning “widow” does not fit the context of the inscription. A. Rotman: *Divine Stories. Divyāvadāna*. Part 1. Somerville 2008, pp. 103 sqq. translates “housewives.”

¹⁰ O. v. Hinüber: “The Kotappakonda Donation,” as note 8 above, p. 7 sq.

by G. Fussman for inscriptions.¹¹ A second group-inflection occurs in *ubhayakulasarvasatvānām* in the inscription (see below).

The word *ubhayakula* needs a closer look. The reading of the characters *ubha* and *kula* is certain. The character between *bha* and *ku* is almost certainly a tripartite *ya*, because, when enlarged, a loop at the beginning of the character becomes visible, which partly overlaps with the middle stroke. This gives the impression of a character at first poorly written and then corrected. Between *ku* and *la*, the metal is damaged. The hole was there probably before the inscription was engraved.

Consequently, the reading *ubhayakula* can be considered as certain. The expression *ubhayakula* occurs for the first time in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa in the wording *apano ubhayakulasa* in a couple of dedicatory inscriptions with female donors. It is translated by J. Ph. Vogel¹² as “of both the houses to which she belongs” and in EIAD¹³ as “members of her family on both sides.” D. C. Sircar¹⁴ paraphrases *apano ubhayakulasa* with *ātmanah ubhayakulasya* and explains *mātāpitṛkulasya yadvā svāmi-pitṛkulasya* and *mātāpitṛkulasya yadvā patipitṛkulasya*. Here, Vappaṭa and his wife, a lady from a good family, Dhruvabhaṭā, are named first as the main donors. Therefore, it is likely that their families are meant in our inscription: *pati-patnī-kula*. The next donors (and the next generation) are the son (*putra* of Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā) Mahāśrī Bhīmaṭa and his wife (*bhāryā*) Śrī Maddhatpalak(ā). They are followed by the third generation, their grandson (*pautra*) Amara and (his) baby daughter (*duhitṛ dhātṛpī*) Amaradevī, who represents the fourth generation. This adds up to (grandparents) Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā, their son Bhīmaṭa and his wife Maddhatpalā and their son, who is at the same time the grandson of Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā, Amara, with his daughter Amaradevī, the great-granddaughter of Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā. The wife of Amara is not named, although his daughter appears among the donors in spite of her tender age. It is tempting to think that Amara’s wife was deceased and perhaps even died when giving birth to Amaradevī, who is, consequently, nourished by a wet-nurse. However, this remains speculation. At any rate there are members of four generations of one family, which is quite unusual because already three generations of donors are but rarely documented in inscriptions.¹⁵

In the same way, as most names of the family members, *ubhayakula* has no case ending. Again, this is a group-inflection, if *ubhayakula* and *sarvasatvānām* are linked with *ubhayakula* standing for *ubhayakulayoḥ*, the families of husband Vappaṭa and wife Dhruvabhaṭā.

Because four generations are enumerated in the inscription, one is tempted to try calculating the age of the couple Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā, certainly the eldest persons mentioned, who can look down even upon their great-granddaughter. If they got married at

¹¹ O. v. Hinüber: *Das ältere Mittelindisch im Überblick*. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse. Sitzungsberichte, 467. Band. Vienna 2001, § 295.

¹² J. Ph. Vogel: “Prakrit Inscriptions from a Buddhist Site at Nagarjunakonda.” EI XX. 1929/30, pp. 1–37, particularly p. 17.

¹³ EIAD Corpus (hisoma.huma-num.fr/exist/apps/EIAD/works), e. g., no. 4 line 10 and S. Baums, A. Griffiths, I. Strauch & V. Tournier: “Early Inscriptions of Āndhradeśa (EIAD). Results of fieldwork in January and February 2016.” BEFEO 102. 2016, pp. 355–398, particularly p. 384.

¹⁴ D. C. Sircar: *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilisation*. Volume I. Calcutta 1965, pp. 230, 237.

¹⁵ Material on families of donors is collected by O. v. Hinüber: “Some Buddhist Donors and Their Families.” IJ 61. 2018, pp. 353–368.

the age of approximately twenty, and if the same is assumed for the next two generations, Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā may have been in their sixties at the time of the donation, their son Bhīmaṭa may have been about 40 if he also got married at the age of about twenty, and if his perhaps only surviving son Amara was of the same age of twenty years old when he might have got married and lost his wife perhaps when Amaradevī was born.

This was the state of the family in Laukika 46, most likely AD 670/1 according to palaeography. Luckily, the older and the younger shape of the character *ya* (perhaps also *ha*) are found side by side in the inscription, which rules out AD 570/1 as too early and AD 770/1 as too late as a correspondence to Laukika 46.

The date allows a look at the cultural environment of the inscription and the bronze, which may have been cast in the kingdom of Palola.¹⁶ According to the palaeographical development the inscription is roughly contemporaneous with Gilgit manuscript E of the Saṃghāṭasūtra, in which the scribe also used both shapes of *ya* and *ha*. Although the same is true for manuscript D, this manuscript was copied in the year Laukika 3 or AD 627/8 and thus 43 years before the donation was made and roughly at the time, when Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā might have got married. During their life-time, the later manuscripts of the Gilgit library were being copied.

Because, if Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā were about 60 years old at the time of the donation, they were born approximately in Laukika 86 in the previous Laukika century or AD 610/1 and lived under the three Paṭola Śāhis Vikramādityanandi (AD 605–625), Surendravikramādityanandi (AD 625–644 [or 655]) and Navasurendrādityanandi (AD 644 [or 655]–685), if the assumed dates of the rulers are taken into consideration. If their great-granddaughter as the youngest member of the family was born near to the date of the inscription, and if she also reached the assumed age of sixty of her great-grandparents, she might have seen the last known ruler of the Palola Śāhis Surendrāditya who was in power around AD 720 according to the T’ang Annals.¹⁷

Of course, all this is no more than an intellectual game and perhaps reading far more into the inscription than there really is. Still, all this is possible and might not be too far removed from historical reality. It is, however, certain that we can follow the family over four generations during the 7th century and for perhaps almost a century, something that is rare for

^{16.} If the bronze was cast in Kashmir, the family lived when the Karkoṭa dynasty came into power by AD 625.

^{17.} The dates of the rulers are mostly fictitious and only a more or less likely approximation, see O. v. Hinüber: *Die Palola Śāhis*. Ihre Steininschriften, Inschriften auf Bronzen, Handschriftenkolophone und Schutzzauber. Antiquities of Northern Pakistan 5. Mainz 2004, p. 99. In addition to the rulers of Palola known in 2004, two new names of members of the Bhagadatta family could be traced in inscriptions. The first is Śīlādityanandi in a very badly preserved inscription on an incense burner (O. v. Hinüber: “An Inscribed Incense Burner from the MacLean Collection in Chicago.” ARIRIAB 13. 2010, pp. 3–8). The relation of Śīlādityanandi to the other persons bearing similar names remains unclear. The second name is Maṅgalavikramādityanandin, which appears in inscription no. 524:5 found at Thalpan (D. Bandini: *Die Felsbildstation Thalpan IV. Katalog Thalpan* (Steine 451-811). Materialien zur Archäologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans Band 9. Mainz 2009, p. 153). There is a vague possibility that, given the structure of his name, he may be the son of Jayamaṅgalavikramādityanandi and his wife Maṅgalakesarī, if the name of the ruler Surendravikramāditya is compared, which is a combination of the names of his mother *Surendramālā* and of his father *Vikramādityanandi*, cf. O. v. Hinüber: *Palola Śāhis*, p. 88f. In both cases the name of the mother is used in the first part of the name. If this assumption should be correct, Maṅgalavikramādityanandi might have been a brother of the 7th ruler of the Palola Śāhis Nandivikramādityanandi. On the other hand, it is equally possible, though much less likely, to see in Maṅgalavikramādityanandi on similar grounds a son of Vajrādityanandi and Maṅgalaḥṃsikā, cf. O. v. Hinüber: “More on Gilgit Bronzes and Some Additions to “*Die Palola Śāhis*”.” ARIRIAB 12 2009, pp. 3–6, particularly p. 6 note 12.

a non-royal family. It is perhaps still rarer that we can even dare to try with all due caution and circumspection to place this family of well-off commoners in the cultural setting of their time.

Figure 1: Buddha of Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā (height 18 cm, pedestal 12,2 cm by 5.6 cm).



Figure 2: Buddha of Vappaṭa and Dhruvabhaṭā (back-side with the ring to attach a halo clearly visible).

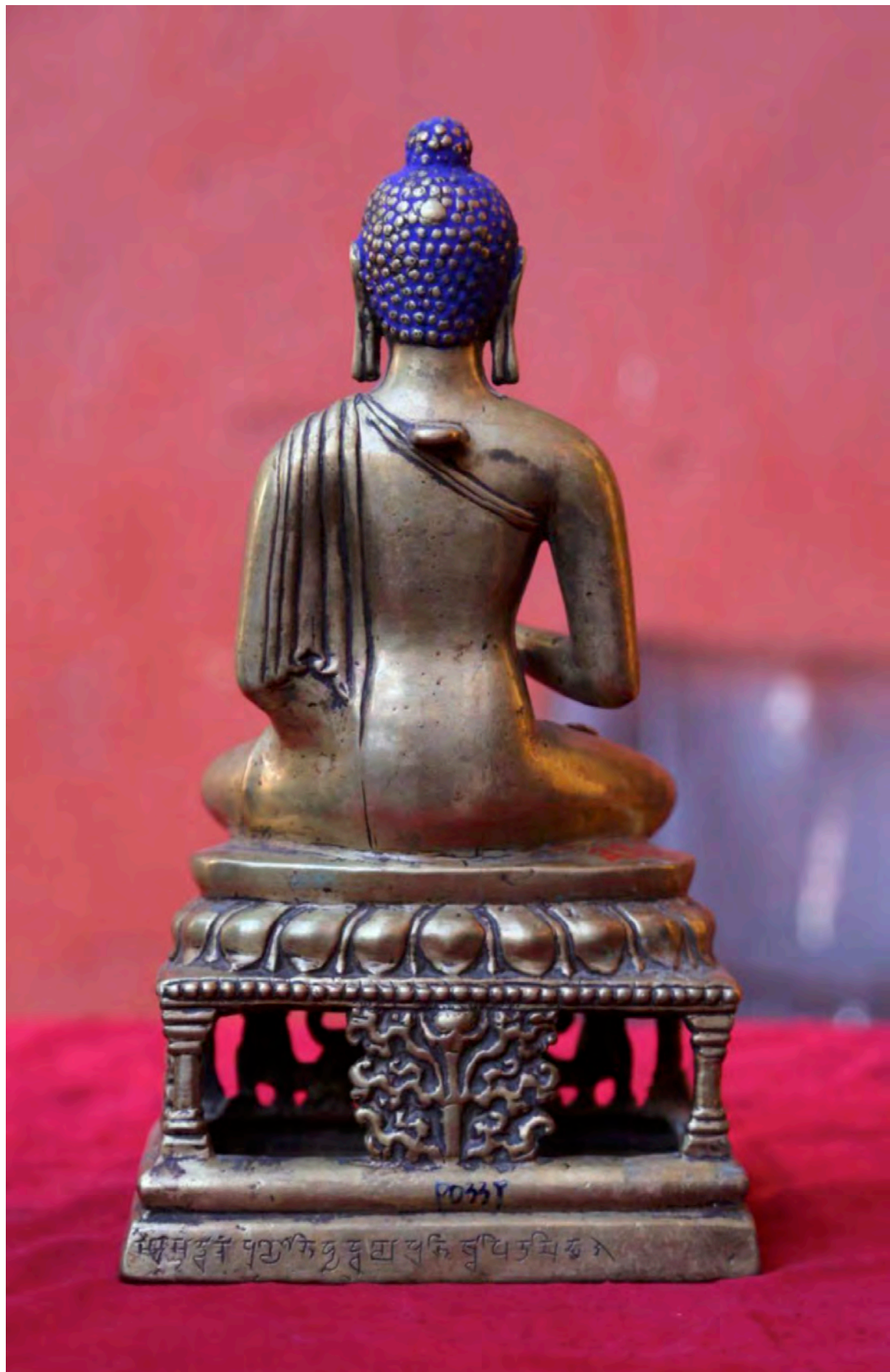


Figure 3: Inscription on the right side of the pedestal.

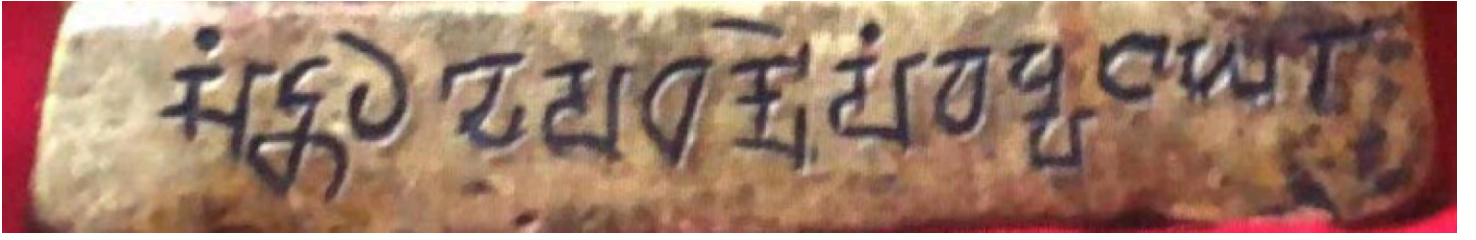


Figure 4: Inscription on the front side of the pedestal.



Figure 5: Inscription on the left side of the pedestal.

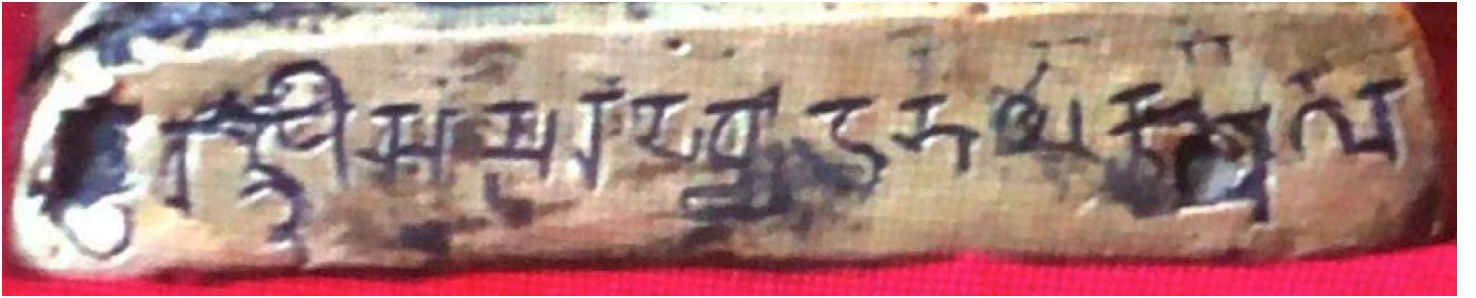


Figure 6: Inscription on the back side of the pedestal.



Figure 7: Inscription of Gotrapāla.



Figure 8: Manuscript E folio 31r line 3 (here line 1) *mahā*(modern shape)*nadyā saha*(old shape)*sraparivārā*.

↓ (hā)

↓ (ha)

